

Iowa's Latino Businesses Show Growing Muscle at State Capitol

by: Douglas Burns
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Latino business leaders had a message to deliver in person at the Statehouse Tuesday.

The message?

Forget our skin color and accents and look at the long list of strong Hawkeye State economic indicators associated with the Latino community.

Latin purchasing power in Iowa was \$1.6 billion in 2004 and is projected to increase to \$2.7 billion by 2009, according to the Iowa Division of Latino Affairs.

Several dozens business, political and media leaders attended the first-ever Iowa Latino Business Capitol Reception to discuss the opportunities these figures represent.

Armando Villareal, a fifth-generation Texan who is now administrator of the Iowa Division of Latino Affairs, said his community's presentation in the Capitol is meant to showcase the economic muscle and entrepreneurial spirit of Hispanics. Doing so in a building where debate has raged in recent months about immigration is vital, Villareal told Iowa Independent.

"There's never been a time in America where the majority population is so dependent on the minority population," Villareal said.

According to his office, the Latino population in Iowa is expected to jump by 335,000 in the year 2030, the largest generational ethnic demographic change since statehood, Villareal said during an interview under the Capitol dome and just steps away from a memorial to Iowa's fallen in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At the moment, an estimated 114,700 Latinos are in Iowa, a 28-percent increase since 2000, the New York Times reports. In some small towns, nearly a third of the citizens are Hispanic, although about half the Hispanic population is concentrated in five Iowa cities, including Des Moines, the Times adds.

"Who's going to be paying the bills in the future?" Villareal asked. "It's almost incumbent on Iowa to start saying, 'Latinos, you are the ones who can pull the wagon.'"

He says the focus on heated immigration debates misses bigger points and takes the attention from problems that plague the full nation.

"You can't blame a Latino making \$8/hr for the mortgage crisis," Villareal said.

Organizers of the event displayed information about the growing number of Hispanic-owned businesses in an effort to show the community is about far more than quick labor for Iowa's depleted rural areas.

"It reflects well on our state and capital city," Gov. Chet Culver told Iowa Independent in an interview about the event. He also spoke to the gathering in the Capitol.

He said the small-business impact of the Latin community in Des Moines has been "real."

"You've got great businesses that are cropping up," Culver said.

According to the Iowa Division of Latino Affairs, in 2002 there were 363 Latino businesses with nearly 3,000 paid employees and annual payroll of \$55 million. Villareal said new numbers on that are expected to be dramatically higher.

Culver, a former teacher, said he taught English as a second language at Hoover High School in Des Moines and knows firsthand the role of Hispanics in Iowa's economy.

"I've seen some amazing families and incredible kids," Culver said.

(Note: Culver with Sergeant Gonzalez photo by Iowa Latino Affairs.)



DSM Sergeant Joe Gonzalez and Governor Culver Recognizing a State conference room named in the sergeant's honor

